

PAUL SMITH

## EXPLORING REALITY

# Cultural Studies & Critical Thinking

FEATURED TOPIC

**The process whereby culture inflects the material world is actually the same process as that by which the material world shapes culture and our experience**

WE SEEM TO BE LIVING in a moment in the United States when there's some profit to be had from casting cultural beliefs, values, and knowledges into strictly oppositional frames. So, even though I believe we are all right now suffering from some dire consequences of that habit, let me begin, almost in mimicry, to address the issue of cultural analysis by way of a kind of Manichean scenario.

On the one hand, there are some people out there who still believe that we can have access to

some fundamental and obvious reality, an em-

pirical natural world that is theoretically open to our unmediated knowledge if only we persevere long enough. But, they believe, the essential clarity of such a reality is then muddled and confused by all the things that we humans do, socially and culturally. For some of them, the core reality even includes a "human nature," too, one that would shine through all the varieties and differences wrought by human cultures, up-bringsings, histories.

On the other hand, there are some others who think that those who cling to the first view of the world are just about as quaint as flat-earthers. These others—and I'd have to admit I'm a sympathiser—would claim that to think that way is, paradoxically, unrealistic. On the contrary, knowledge of our reality, or of the material world in which we live, is not ever separable from, but indeed is absolutely dependent upon, the cultures we make and have made.

This opposition between two ways of conceiving of the world in which we live is an old one, obviously—perhaps even older than the putative clash of Christian and Islamic civilizations that we're currently hearing a lot about. But it's one that we appear to be stuck with when we try to

talk about culture and cultural analysis in the modern American university. And, by and large, it seems that one side currently has all the cards. The predominant ideology of universities and university disciplines in our day tends to reflect the first position and rewards its faith in the perfectibility of our knowledge of some objective reality. Other ways of exploring reality and our knowledge of reality often get lost in the shuffle—especially when it comes to handing out whatever benefits and rewards the university has to offer.

### Cultural analysis

And yet, the other side never quite goes away. Indeed, I'd say that its alternative ways of exploring reality and knowledge have actually made some headway in the last little while. Cultural analysis is, in fact, beginning to provide innovative and satisfying ways of thinking through the complex interrelations of culture and what I prefer to call the material (rather than the natural) world. The new ways of exploring reality that cultural analysis constitutes indeed begin by taking seriously precisely the complexity of forces and processes for which culture is, so to speak, the clearing house. The simplest way of summarizing what cultural analysis assumes is to say that the process whereby culture inflects the material world is actually the same process as that by which the material world shapes culture and our experience. The two processes are indissoluble to the point that they are *the same process*.

In that regard, I have to disagree somewhat with Peter Stearns's suggestion in his lead article that the core of cultural analysis is going to be found in the concept of causation—how does culture affect or effect, produce or modulate experience and knowledge, etc. I'd argue that a linear, one-way concept of causation doesn't have much to say to cultural analysis at this point. Or rather, it's no longer the predominant or most

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powerful mode of explanation for cultural analysis. The gist of cultural analysis at its best is, indeed, the establishment of an idea of causality that is something akin to what I suggested above: a dialectical, multivalent process.

Indeed, I'd say that this central recognition was in many ways the nub of the so-called "cultural turn" that was undertaken, mostly in the last three decades of the twentieth century, by the most progressive research in many disciplines (from geography to English, history to sociology, and so on). This "turn" was never simply a matter of the traditional disciplines suddenly waking up to that troublesome thing, "culture," and then adding it to a list of topics that have to be dealt with. Rather, the new (in some cases, renewed) attention to culture resulted from and also brought about new ways of thinking, new assumptions and hypotheses about the old and stale nature/nurture doublet.

Even if it's true that the progress of the cultural turn in many disciplines has by now slowed down somewhat, it would be wrong to think of that as the end of a journey, and still less as a wasted journey. Far from landing us up in exhaustion or in some pointless cul-de-sac, the turn has actually affected each of those disciplines so deeply that each of them has now to

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deal with fundamentally different assumptions, new descriptions, and new ways of conceptualizing the world: in short, different approaches to exploring reality. In addition, as another outcrop of the same turn, we've also seen the rise of cultural studies as a relatively discrete field.

#### **Cultural studies and critical thinking**

So, things have changed quite a bit. But, at the same time, it's true that the new conditions in those disciplines affected by the cultural turn have still not translated into strong action in terms of pedagogy, and current modes of research have been slow to take on curricular form.

In one way this shouldn't surprise any of us. It always seems to take an unconscionably long time for the results of developments in the disciplines to trickle down the curricular hill. This is a problem, it should be said, which affects curricular development far beyond the present issue of cultural analysis, and is one that in my view even constitutes a kind of continual structural crisis in higher education. That is, structurally, individual disciplines are still literally paid to make their presence felt in general education and university education programs, and their tendency is nearly always to plant their flag in its oldest, most recognizable, and safest colors. In ad-

**George  
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dition to that, American universities seem structurally unable or unwilling to find ways (a few brave experiments excepted) to have their most exciting and accomplished intellectuals teach the youngest students and the most basic classes.

These are issues that administrators and faculty probably need to take up sooner rather than later at the most general level, as well as in relation to the issue we're discussing here.

But it's also the case that necessary kinds of adjustment seem to become harder to make when the issues involve relatively critical forms of research and pedagogy, such as cultural analysis. My suspicion is that this is because such projects tend to bring to the fore once more something that has gradually disappeared from American universities' sense of themselves. That is, nearly every university mission statement calls for critical thinking in some guise or other; and the injunction is often accompanied by an appeal to the ideal of an informed citizenry in a democracy (or words to that effect). These are ideals that, unhappily, seem to have taken a back seat in the last decades.

But the apparent reluctance to do so is probably not entirely a matter of the structural habits of interaction in the university, nor simply a matter of a waning commitment to critical thinking. There is, on a more mundane level, a chronic and generic kind of suspicion of issues to do with culture, so the reluctance I'm talking about is also specific to views of cultural analysis. I'd guess in the end that this is because cultural analysis just isn't safe and sanitary. It brings into question other ways of seeing and knowing that are generally untroubled about their own importance and power. Equally, cultural analysis is a kind of upstart in the generally well-ordered garden of the disciplines. It proposes an intellectual and conceptual agenda that is not to be found in what we can call the "default mode" of each of the individual disciplines.

### **Cultural analysis and science**

Because of these factors, cultural analysis (especially in its cultural studies manifestations) often gets branded as the outlaw in various ways. In particular, cultural analysis is, as Peter Stearns has pointed out in his opening article, often attacked for the alleged crime of relativism, and then kicked again for its aggressive habit of critique. Stearns suggests that one of the places where tensions arise most rapidly is in "the in-

teraction between cultural analysis and science." And perhaps exactly because the tension there is often so acute, that's a good place to try to defend cultural analysis against the charges levelled at it—and perhaps also to begin to suggest something concrete about the benefits of cultural analysis.

The ambition of cultural analysis would never be (or rather, *should* never be) to comprehensively trash science, nor simply to try to relativize its values. Rather, the first ambition needs to be to produce something like a description of the way in which scientific knowledge comes to be located, understood, and valued in the cultures we inhabit. It doesn't do, obviously, to say that scientific discourse is no more "true" or explanatory than any other discourses (the relativist path). Nor does it do to simply fling out, in the spirit of some vague radicalism, scarifying indictments of science's "ideological complicity" (the path of critique).

What does make sense, however, is to expect our students to know something about some of the following things: How was the idea of science born? What forms of ratiocination has it developed? Who has and has had access to scientific knowledge and under what circumstances? What is the relation of scientific knowledge to philosophical issues of truth? How does science turn into technology and even come to be confused with it? How do we come to have such faith in scientific knowledge and trust in its attendant products and technologies? Are the conditions for such faith and trust universal and timeless, or do they change? What specific interests—economic, political, ideological—are involved in maintaining our faith and trust in science and technology? And so on.

Each question implies in one way or another that science is not some solid, laser-like beam making its way boldly toward the truth before getting deflected by the fog of culture. Rather, the questions suggest, science is already organically and constitutionally part of culture. Science is produced and defined within culture, is deployed and modified by it, and can therefore be understood only within it and its terms. The important point here is that such a view of science is not available, by and large, from within science itself, nor is it comprehensively available from the individual disciplines. It's only available from within some other project like cultural studies, or cultural analysis more generally.

Such an understanding is not, of course, espe-

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cially welcome in many disciplines, and is probably not exactly what scientists want to hear either. But part of the task of cultural analysis has to be to explain why exactly that's the case. Why the reluctance to hear? What actually warrants the certainties and the confidence that support the predominant views of reality and knowledge? Cultural analysis would want to try to locate those certainties within the realm of culture and experience as that realm arises from particular material circumstances, and to be able to offer as knowledge a description of the location and genesis of those supposed veracities and assumptions. In that sense, cultural analysis must always cling to its controversial role of 'critique.' And here I don't mean critique in the threatening way it's often heard. I mean, rather, something like what we used to call constructive criticism. By its very nature, cultural analysis is always going to include in its project a questioning and investigation of the forms of disciplinary knowledge.

My list of the questions that might arise when cultural analysis meets science isn't meant to be an exhaustive one (though it does reflect what I

personally think *ought* to be some priorities). The list suggests, at a minimum, that there are plenty of things to know and to describe about science that are not themselves "science." That minimum is something I think we should expect our students to understand

(and our faculty and administrative colleagues to support) as a genuine educational goal.

And lest all that seem overly obvious, it might be instructive to ask oneself where in today's curricula around the country will we find that minimum standard rigorously attended to? The answer is, I'd say, that at best we find such issues scattered across the syllabi of the individual disciplines, or maybe in one or two courses offered in the history of science, or maybe in the curriculum of a cultural studies program. And many of these would be, in any case, only graduate level classes. There is, by and large, very little out there that would suggest to undergraduate students that the ways of exploring reality that I've been pointing to here are intellectually coherent and part of what's necessary for today's educated citizenry.

Babson College



### Part of the curricular structure

But the drift of my argument here implies that what's needed is not just a general education project in cultural analysis, but also a recognition that cultural analysis is ready to take its place more solidly in the undergraduate curriculum as a whole. And this would have to be a project that ran the risk of at least appearing to challenge the vested interests of specific disciplines.

Any such project is difficult to initiate and carry through without support and resources from administrations. There's no need to belabor that point here, evidently. But for those of us on the ground, as it were, such a project also means elaborating the necessary and appropriate curricula and syllabi. I've spent a good proportion of my career teaching cultural studies in a variety of contexts, and now in the doctoral program at George Mason. Perhaps predictably, I'm of the view that cultural studies programs are ideally situated to be at least the launching pad for such a project. Cultural studies programs do already have some of the frameworks in place, even at the undergraduate level in some instances, to become part of a broader project of cultural analysis and, indeed, to guide it.

### An important flaw

Cultural studies does have its problems, of course, as people both inside and outside the field would be quick to point out. One of the largest, in my view, is an apparent reluctance on the part of many of the field's most prominent scholars—the older generation of cultural studies, if you will—to be beholden to any overarching explanatory discourse, theoretical frame, or methodological approach. One result of this has been a kind of eclecticism in cultural studies work that makes it hard to pin down what exactly a specifically cultural studies approach might really be. This is an important flaw, obviously. Among other things, it means that cultural studies has few grounds on which to reproduce itself in its students, graduate or undergraduate—and this is clearly a problem in the context of the increasing institutionalization of the field.

On the other hand, precisely because cultural studies is becoming more and more respectable and established in the university, it is beginning to forge much more credible curricula. At the risk of promoting my own interests, I'd say that the doctoral program in cultural studies where I

teach at George Mason University is something of a model. The curriculum there reflects many of the arguments I have been making: Most importantly, in my opinion, it takes a specific view of the complex relation of culture and the material world; it takes advantage of the way that other disciplines have changed and been affected by the cultural turn; it discourages the habits of relativism and wayward critique that often mar the field; and it maintains, at the same time, a critical view of the forms of knowledge of other disciplines.

There are other elements to the program that would be worth mentioning, if I had more space. But one interesting potential it has, it seems to me, is that although it is of course a graduate program, many of its structural strengths and component parts could readily be adapted to an undergraduate program and to general education in particular. Indeed, this process has already been initiated, with the program contributing an undergraduate course on "Culture and Globalization" to the university's incipient global affairs major.

There's much more that could be done, of course. But I think the important point is that cultural studies programs (many of them, it should be recalled, still fledgling enterprises) have the potential to mature and venture further into the undergraduate arena. On the basis of that assumption, I'd want to suggest that cultural studies could still be—indeed, probably *should* still be—seen as the best hope for the expansion of cultural analysis in the university. □

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